

# **The Whispering Shell**

by  
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**HAWKER BROWNLOW**  
E D U C A T I O N

**1** OUTSIDE THE DOOR to Captain Neptune's Magical Mystery Shop, Kenyette Perry paused. Should she go in today?

She really didn't have money to buy anything. And she'd already been in the shop at least five times this month.

Yet Kenyette felt the shop tugging at her. Oh, sure, some of the stuff in the old store was junk. But the treasures Captain Neptune had gathered at sea were different.

As Kenyette stepped inside, she stared again at the familiar things. All around the shop, Captain Neptune had ancient masks and coconut shells carved into faces. In corners and atop counters lay sea shells, some as big as basketballs. Exotic shells, tiny as buttons, dangled from gold chains.

There were more treasures that looked as though they'd come straight off an ancient ship. Three huge rusty chests stood along one wall. Old maps, torn and brown from use, were tacked up here and there. Clocks of every size, shape, and sound

ticked away from all corners.

But among all these items, Captain Neptune wasn't to be seen. That's strange, thought Kenyette. He's usually in the shop this time of day.

"Captain Neptune?" she called. "Are you here?"

"Always," came the reply from behind her.

Kenyette jumped and spun around. "Oh—oh, I thought—" Embarrassed, she fell silent.

Captain Neptune laughed, tipping back his head of gray-black hair. He laughed with a sound like flames eating their way through dry leaves. With his dark eyes and white teeth, Kenyette thought he might have been handsome once. But now his tall, thin body seemed weak and old. His face was very wrinkled too.

Yet Captain Neptune didn't seem ready to give in to old age. He always wore a sea captain's hat. And he liked to drape a lot of gold jewelry around his neck and wrists.

"Did I startle you, child? A harmless

old man like me? Why should I always frighten you so, I wonder?" He laughed again.

A chill raced down Kenyette's spine. Captain Neptune always seemed to know her thoughts. Maybe he was one of those mind readers—or psychics—she'd read about. Anyway, it was spooky.

"So have you come to buy one of my precious items, Kenyette?"

"No, I was just looking." That was what she did most days. But sometimes she'd buy a shell or a piece of coral. She already had a collection of about thirty shells.

"Look what I have here," Captain Neptune said. "Something wonderful indeed. It's a trumpet shell from a huge snail who lived in Australian seas."

Kenyette stared as he held up a marvelous shiny shell, shaped like a trumpet. It was peach-colored on the inside. On the outside, the creamy color was speckled with dark blue spots.

"Oh, that's so pretty," Kenyette said.

"As you are, child," said the captain.

"It's just the thing for you."

Kenyette felt a rush of confusion.

"No," she said quickly, "I'm not pretty."

Kenyette didn't need a mirror to tell her what she looked like. All she had to do was listen to what the other sixth graders said. "Chubbette Kenyette" and "fatso" were two of their favorite nicknames for her.

When Kenyette was little, being plump was cute. But baby fat isn't cute when you're twelve years old. And the name-calling was very painful.

Kenyette continued, "But that shell *is* really pretty." The strange blue spots seemed to change colors before her eyes.

"This is no ordinary shell, Kenyette," the captain explained. "It's magic."

"Really?" Kenyette couldn't help but laugh. She sometimes wished magic was real. But so often, it was just rabbits in hats and silly card tricks.

Yet strange things *did* happen. Things that nobody could explain. Kenyette recalled her grandmother's story about Grandad.

Grandma had told how Grandad had gone off to fight in the war. While he was gone, Grandma had lived in a tiny apartment in New York. One day, Grandad came to the door. He smiled at Grandma, gently kissed her—and then vanished.

Later Grandma learned that Grandad had died that day in battle thousands of miles away. She swore it happened just like that.

“You put the shell to your ear and you will know,” said Captain Neptune.

“Know what?” Kenyette asked.

“What others think of you, child. What they say when you’re not there. Wouldn’t that be a fine thing to know?”

Kenyette’s brown eyes widened. “Can the shell really do that, Captain Neptune?”

Then she laughed again at the thought. It couldn’t be. A shell you could listen to and know what others thought or said? But in this shop, it was easy to believe all kinds of incredible things.

“Yes, it can. It’s magic—and such magic! Haven’t you ever wondered what